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# THE MECHANISM OF POETIC INSPIRATION

BY CONRAD AIKEN

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THERE is a widespread notion in the public mind that poetic inspiration has something mysterious and translunar about it, something which altogether escapes human analysis, which it would be almost sacrilege for analysis to touch. The Romans spoke of the poet's divine afflatus, the Elizabethans of his fine frenzy. And even in our own day critics, and poets themselves, are not lacking who take the affair quite as seriously. Our critics and poets are themselves largely responsible for this,—they are a sentimental lot, even when most discerning, and cannot help indulging, on the one hand, in a reverential attitude toward the art, and, on the other, in a reverential attitude toward themselves. Little of the scientific spirit which has begun to light the literary criticism of France, for example, has manifested itself in America. Our criticism is still a rather primitive parade of likes and dislikes: there is little inquiry into psychological causes.

Meanwhile, if the literary folk have been droning, the scientists have been busy. Most critics, at least, are familiar already with the theory of Sigmund Freud, that poetry, like the dream, is an outcome of suppression, a release of complexes. To the curious-minded this, however erratic or inadequate, was at any rate a step in the right direction. It started with the admirable predicate that after all poetry is a perfectly human product, and that therefore it must play a specific part in the human animal's functional needs. It at once opened to the psychologist, (amateur as well as professional!) the entire field of literature, and in a new light: he was invited to behold here not merely certain works of art, but also a vast amount of documentary evidence, in the last analysis naïve, as to the functioning of the human mind,—in other words, so many confessions.

In the beginning, ludicrous mistakes and exaggerations were made. This was to be expected. Freud himself has steadily modified his position, as was bound to happen in the early and necessarily empirical stage of a new psychological method. There have been others, too, who have gone forward with the method, in a purely objective way, by trial and error. And the most interesting of them from the literary viewpoint is Nicolas Kostyleff, whose book, *Le Mécanisme Cérébrale de la Pensée*, was published in Paris within a few years. In addition to much in this book which is of an interest purely psychological, there are also successive chapters dealing with poetic inspiration, the poetic methods of Victor Hugo, and the method of the novelist. M. Kostyleff does not pretend to have solved any of these questions. He is content with indicating a direction,—he does not attempt to delimit. He offers suggestions and observations that should be of tremendous value to the literary critic.

M. Kostyleff, in the chapter devoted to poetic inspiration, takes as his starting-point a belief that Freud's explanation of it as due entirely to hidden complexes, largely erotic, is insufficient. Certain types of poetry, notably those that approximate wish-thinking, clearly indicate such an origin. But what are we to do with the vast amount of poetry which cannot so conveniently be fitted into this category,—poetry, for example, which does not in any obvious sense appear to be the satisfaction of either erotic or merely aesthetic needs: poetry, indeed, which would appear to belong to a cerebral rather than a merely emotional plane? M. Kostyleff here concludes, it appears wisely, that after all the writing of poetry is, like speech itself, a purely cerebral affair: and that it is not the result of a discharge of an excess of emotion in the poet so much as a cerebral reaction to external stimuli. This conclusion he at once connects with a theory, developed in earlier chapters, of verbo-motor reactions: a theory that words, like other sensory impressions derived from contact with reality, are stored in the mind, not discretely, but in chains of association, where they become unconscious, and appear to be forgotten; but that upon a given stimulus these chains of associated words begin automatically unravelling, become again conscious.

With this theory of poetic inspiration in mind, M. Kostyleff approached various contemporary French poets and asked them to divulge the secret of their methods of composi-

tion. Among these poets were Madame de Noailles, M. Robert de Montesquiou, M. Haraucourt, M. Abel Bonnard, and M. Fernand Gregh. The explanations of these poets seemed at first sight to be rather divergent. Some wrote rapidly, some slowly. Some conceived their poems in terms of visual line and space, some aurally in terms of music. Some started with the final or key line and wrote up to or around it, and some sketched rapidly in a sort of improvisation, later filling in and altering. But one fact began to emerge which seemed to be true of all: the fact that the initial impulse was almost always due to an external stimulus of some sort which effected, in a purely cerebral way, a verbal discharge of automatic associations, not necessarily attended by an excess of emotion. It became also apparent that the poets themselves were to a considerable extent aware of this. They sought to document themselves on subjects which appealed to them, so as to enrich their associations; and, further, they endeavored to surround themselves with objects in some way related to the chosen theme, or to adopt, if possible, a suggestive environment.

This is already, it is clear, a sufficiently shrewd blow at the usual theory of poetic inspiration, that it is due to a tempest of emotion in the poet. But M. Kostyleff makes it even shrewder. On examining carefully the work of these various poets he found it to be almost invariably true that the emotional value of the completed poem far outweighed the emotional value of the original idea. The latter, in fact, frequently became quite insignificant. This would certainly indicate that the original impulse is merely a slight spring, which, once released, sets in motion a rather imposing engine. In fact, it was found in many cases that the original idea was either lost sight of entirely as the poem developed or actually contradicted. The explanation of this is simple, if the basic theory is correct. For if it is true that verbal discharges take place in associated chains, then we should expect that one such verbal discharge should be self-generating, that one set of associations should lead directly to another. No sooner does one flight of ideas come to an end than some overtone in it awakens further associations and another flight begins. And this was precisely what M. Kostyleff found to be true in his examination of many of these poems, particularly in the first drafts of them, with the many omissions, the many leaps to what at first glance might appear to be unre-

lated ideas. The completed poems, then, appeared to be not so much orderly developments of the original theme (which indeed in most instances could not alone offer the necessary amount of associations to account for the wealth or emotional power of the poem) as an accumulation of successive waves of verbal discharge due to association, each rushing farther from the starting-point. In this manner we get a finished poem which far outruns, in emotional weight, the initial impulse. Of M. Bonnard's *Le Chant du Coq à L'Aurore*, for example, M. Kostyleff remarks: "It is evident that this inspiration is due in part to a profound emotion before the beauties of nature, but the verbal discharge certainly surpasses it in extent, and can only be explained by the pleasure of renewing it. . . . And, everything considered, the emotion and the reaction to it are not equivalent. This explains also why in other cases the emotion can be slight, almost purely intellectual. In the preceding poem it is an emotion such as one feels, or can feel after pleasure, which stimulates the imagination. . . . It is, before all, a play of cerebral reflexes . . . it is not an equivalent of emotion alone. It would never have become what it is if it had not had at its disposal great richnesses of memory, verbal and visual; which permit [the poet] to prolong the emotion, to renew it, and to communicate it to others." Again, of *Douleur* by Comtesse de Noailles, he says: "The feeling is always tender, but it awakens sometimes an exalted thought, sometimes a pessimistic thought. This proves once more that inspiration is not to be confused with the emotion which causes it. We saw it, in Bonnard, outstrip the emotional stimulus, we see it now in contradiction with itself; and that alone can explain the sustained flight of literary creation. If poetry were only an emotional discharge, it would be very much less complex than it is. In reality the emotional shock finds in the poet preformed cerebral mechanisms: mechanisms preformed by study, by meditation, by life. These are chains of reflexes which are not themselves kept in the brain, but the paths of which are traced there and easily reproduced. In a poet these reproductions are particularly easy, and the chains very numerous. The cerebral reflexes, becoming linked at the will of unforeseen connections, draw him along beyond the emotional stimulus. . . . Indeed, what matters the extent of the emotional power, since the principle does not lie there, but in the chains of cerebral reflexes, and since

the latter can be set off by a stimulus wholly cerebral? . . . This obliges us to admit at last that poetic inspiration has two sources: the sensibility of the poet, and the preformed mechanisms of verbal reactions. These last we understand in the widest sense of the term, with the images to which they attach themselves, as also with quite precise qualities of rhythm and vocal harmony. A great poet is recognized not only because he is sensitive and vibrant, but also by the wholly personal qualities of this mechanism. And that is not a word of simple meaning. The personal qualities consist in the evocation of impressions which are not banal, and in the expression of them in a rhythm and sonority peculiar to themselves. . . . This formula seems to be important, especially for our time, when there are so many good poets—and so few great ones! . . . It is time to establish clearly in the eyes of the literary critic that to be a true poet it is not sufficient to have emotivity, internal fever, nor even a certain richness of cerebral images; it is also necessary to have a gift of verbo-motor discharge which is *personal*. For objective psychology, this presents something quite precise, the mental images being the cerebral reflexes directly associated with those of hearing and speech. This association is not innate: it is formed little by little from the first years of life. What is innate in the poet is a certain refinement of the sensorial organs. Seeing and hearing much as other children do, he must retain more memories, and better selected impressions. Each of these traces the path of a reflex; the visual and auditory reflexes are associated with definite verbal reactions; and at the time when his nervous system becomes rich enough to produce sensorial discharges, he finds himself already gifted with what we have just called the preformed mechanism of verbal reactions." In this connection M. Kostyleff points out that, as we should expect, poets are precocious as children, read omnivorously at an early age, and thus store up rich deposits of verbo-motor reactions, rich not only as regards sensorial impressions, but also as regards prosodic arrangement. And as evidence that the mature poet is not above enriching his vocabulary by conscious effort he goes rather exhaustively into a survey of the methods by which Victor Hugo was accustomed to document himself for literary creation, and into the rather elaborate system of auto-suggestion (through choice of environment, books, mode of life) by which M. Robert de Montesquiou adduces in himself

the proper frame of mind for work. And at the end of his chapter he concludes:

To be a great poet it is not at all necessary to have a temperament as pronounced as that of a Musset or a Baudelaire. A delicate taste, if it be personal, may also serve as a basis for poetic inspiration. But it is the essential condition for this that the specific sensibility of the individual should determine for him the formation of an adequate mechanism of verbal reactions . . . . The number of parlor poets increases, and many of them lack neither emotion nor energy for sonority of expression. In what do they fail of being true poets? The study we have just made directly answers this question. They lack a personal mechanism of verbal reactions. This mechanism is part of inspiration. It is formed long before the moment of discharge, from all that the poet reads or hears, and when the moment arrives, it begins to act without his being able to say whence the words come to him. Everyone uses words, most words can be made into verses, but the more or less personal character of the latter distinguishes clearly those which are only an imitation, an echo of the poetic harmonies of the past, from the "sovereign verses" which leap from the mind of the poet as the product of a personal faculty for storing up and grouping verbal reactions. . . . Objective psychology finds here a very important contribution. To the factor revealed by Freud,—(the stimulus in the revival of psychic complexes,—) we see added another having an equally precise place in the organism,—an extraordinarily extended chain of verbal reactions.

M. Kostyleff does not presume, naturally, in reaching this conclusion, to have cleared up the entire problem,—he is probably as aware as any one that he has made only a beginning. For at once further baffling questions arise. To begin with, though we can subscribe without reluctance to the main tenet of M. Kostyleff's thesis that once set in motion a flight of poetic creations is to some extent self-renewing, ramifying by association from one group of reflexes to another; and though we cannot help being struck by the plausibility of his conclusion that the sole difference between the imitative and the original poet is in the more personal quality of the latter's mechanism of verbal reactions, it is clear that in this matter of the "personal quality" lies something which, though of very great importance from the literary viewpoint, is left rather vague. It will be recalled that M. Kostyleff makes a good deal of the fact that the poet, both instinctively in childhood and deliberately in maturity, seeks by reading to enlarge his vocabulary and the richness of his prosodic sense. But of course the imitative poet does this quite as much as the original one: if not more. Their stores of verbo-motor reactions are acquired, presumably, in quite

the same sort of way. Where, then, does the difference arise? In what manner does this store become, as M. Kostyleff says, more closely related in the one case than in the other to the poet's specific sensibility? It is at least questionable whether this distinction is not a false one. For, in a broad sense, no individual's store of verbo-motor reactions can be other than specifically personal to him. This would seem to force our search for a distinction backward one degree to the matter of sensibility itself. It would suggest a revision of M. Kostyleff's statement that imitative poets "lack a personal mechanism of verbal reactions" to a statement that, though fully equipped with such a mechanism, (many such poets have, even among literary folk, exceptional vocabularies) they lack any peculiarity of sensibility: they do not extend the field of our consciousness in any new direction. This would in turn indicate that M. Kostyleff puts undue emphasis on the merely linguistic aspect of the poet's function, with a faint, though perhaps unintentional, implication that language determines thought rather more than thought determines language. But may not a poet be great even if there be nothing remarkably original or bizarre about his work with respect to language or style,—great by reason of the poetic content, or thought, rather than for verbal or prosodic brilliance? . . . This brings us to the fact that there are two great tendencies in poetry,—two kinds of poetic value; and the classification seems to obtain for other arts as well. In one of them the emphasis is on the externals,—on form, style, color, texture, with the intention of producing a sensorial effect as brilliant as possible; in the other the emphasis is on the content, and the style is made secondary, a transparent glass through which one may most perfectly see. Clearly, it is on poetry of the former rather than of the latter class that M. Kostyleff has based his conclusions: the lyric and decorative rather than the philosophical and narrative. For it is obvious at once that in poetry of the latter class the direction of the poem would not be dictated by the automatic unfolding of associated verbal chain reflexes, but, on the contrary, that the verbal mechanisms themselves would be directed throughout by the original poetic theme. . . .

If it is true, therefore, that M. Kostyleff has thrown an extremely interesting light on one mechanical aspect of literary creation, he clearly fails, indeed he does not attempt, to bring this aspect of it into relation with the aspect studied



by Freud. We are shown parts of the machine, but not the machine in motion. What, after all, is the compelling power at the bottom of poetic creation? If it were merely a matter of mechanical reactions, on a verbal plane, blind and accidental, it is obvious that one experience quite as much as another would cause a poetic precipitate in the poet's mind. But we know this not to be true. It is apparent that some selective principle is at work: some affective principle, or pleasure principle, which vitally concerns the poet. He reacts more acutely and more richly to some stimuli than to others; and even among these reactions he exercises a rigid system of suppression and selection. To be sure this power is self-generating, once started,—by accretion the affects intensify and perpetuate themselves, leaving always a richer deposit of associations, a greater capacity for prolonged cerebral response. But we must not forget that this selective principle has its beginning somewhere, that it is universal, that it arises in accordance with some need. Every man, as it has become commonplace to remark, is in some degree a poet. In consequence it is clear that in dealing with poetry we are dealing with something which plays some specific and organic part in the life of man. This, in default of any more plausible suggestion, brings us back to the theory of Freud. It is to some deep hunger, whether erotic or not, or to some analogous compulsion, that we must look for the source of the power that sets in motion the delicate mechanism, on another plane, which M. Kostyleff has begun to illuminate for us. It is clear that this is not merely a sexual hunger, nor an aesthetic hunger, nor an ethical hunger, though all may have their place in it. . . . Is it merely in general the hunger of the frustrate (which we all are) for richer experience?

However we answer that question, it is certain that such objective studies of literature as this of M. Kostyleff indicate for us a new method in literary criticism. With the clouds of myth and mystery blown away, we begin to see more clearly; we shall be better able to understand and to discriminate. And if we are thus made to see that literature plays a vital functional part in our lives, we must eventually begin to value our literature, *more consciously*, in the degree in which it fulfils that function.

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